**Governing the futures: participation as a battlefield over governance, democracy and innovation**

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**Abstract:**

The futures seem to lie ahead of us but they also drive patterns of governance, democracy and innovation right now. Very often, we are presented with visions of the future where the pace of technical change over-runs the capacity of ‘traditional’ institutions, where science-based progress offer a world of utopia – or sometimes dystopia, and where the potential is enormous if only governments and industry could act appropriately and speedily. At times, these futures seem to open up to an overwhelming range of possibilities: the future will be one of radical and unanticipated change. At others, they are presented as much more restricted: there is no choice if our societies are to remain competitive and successful. Very often, images of science and technology lie at the heart of these future possibilities – whether in the form of new fields such as synthetic biotechnology, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology or else as revolutionary developments from existing areas such as information technology, transport and agriculture.

New forms of participation need to be understood in relation to a wider transformation of governance that has led to the empowerment of certain actors but disempowerment of others. Participation, Swyngedouw (2005:1993) argues, “is one of the key terrains on which battles over the form of governance and the character of regulation are currently being fought out”.

In this paper we take public engagement with emerging technologies as a starting point and focus on how images of societal institutions, regulation and the role of the market appear in such engagements. We will also contrast government-led public engagement initiatives with other user-led forms of engagement such as DIY biology. What futures are imagined as desirable? What is seen to stifle or push changes in this direction? How should we think of key actors and stakeholders - and how are they enacted within different models of the future? What does this discussion of socio-technical futures mean for current notions of democracy?